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SAFEGUARDING YOUR FOOD AND DRUG SUPPLY -- No. 45

March 9, 1931

A series of radio talks by W. R. M. Wharton, chief of the eastern district, Food and Drug Administration, U. S. Department of Agriculture, broadcast Monday mornings at 10 A.M., Eastern Time, through WJZ, New York, and associated National Broadcasting Company stations.

Good morning, my radio friends, your representative of the Federal Food and Drug Administration comes to you this morning for the forty-fifth time to tell you how your foods and drugs are safeguarded by the enforcement of the Federal food and drugs act, and to tell you how to read labels, in order that you may become careful, discriminating and economical buyers.

You all remember the 1928-29 influenza epidemic. That epidemic was widespread and was truly a calamity. Immediately upon the appearance of the disease, there began to appear emblazoned in the street cars, on bill boards, and in the newspapers advertisements promising that this or that product taken, or rubbed, or smelled, or inhaled, would produce both immunity for the well and cure for the sick. The patent medicine manufacturers were figuring on cashing in on this national calamity. They were not all new operators in the field, though many of them conceived and prepared their products overnight to be in on the profits waiting to be collected from a patient people who were willing to pay money to secure what they might be persuaded to believe were cures or preventives of influenza. Many of the manufacturers of these products knew nothing of medicine, therapeutics, or scientific treatment of disease and the claims of preventive and curative effect were made in spite of the practically uniform scientific opinion that there is no known drug or combination of drugs which will of themselves either prevent or cure influenza. Sales of one of these influenza products, during the height of the epidemic, ran as high as 10,000 bottles per day.

Your Federal food and drug officials seized and confiscated hundreds of shipments of fraudulently labeled 'flu nostrums and now the claims of curative and preventive value for such products have been very noticeably toned down. Many of them have passed on, never to be revived, let us hope. It is by actions such as these, my friends, that the enforcement of the food and drugs act protects your food and drug supply.

Now, let us take up our read-the-label subject for today. Patent medicines. I talked at length on this same subject last week. Today, I have more to tell you about how to read labels on patent medicines.

First, let me say that I intend no condemnation of the patent medicine business, of itself, and that I am not opposed to all self-medication. There are a great many products which are useful as home treatments for simple ailments and as first aids. There are many drugs which are palliatives and aids

in treating disorders, and some that are useful in the relief of pain, but practically all have very decided limitations. Many are worthless. Some are dangerous. My remarks today will apply, as they did last week, to the nostrums, to ineffective, worthless, and falsely and fraudulently labeled medicines.

Perhaps the most misleading form of fake medicine labeling and advertising is that involving the use of testimonials. My friends, I have investigated thousands of testimonials which have been used to further the sale of patent medicines and I can tell you, as a result of these extensive investigations, that medicine testimonials are practically worthless. There is no question but that the reading of what purports to be a personal statement reporting beneficial results from taking this or that patent medicine, has an effect in persuading people to buy that particular medicine. Well, that's what testimonials are designed to do. Now let me tell you the truth about nostrum testimonials. Some testimonials are given for pay of one kind or another. One testimonial giver will take money, another a new suit of clothes; some a supply of their own pictures, others a supply of the particular medicine. Some give testimonials because they like to see their names or pictures in print.

After these have been eliminated from consideration, we have to consider the testimonials furnished with honest intent. It is a well known fact that in perhaps nine out of ten cases of illness, recovery is due to natural causes. The same result follows, whatever medicine the patient takes, and even if he takes no medicine at all.

We are all more or less disposed to think if we get well after adopting any particular measure that the method adopted is responsible for our recovery. The old Romans had a proverb, "Post hoc, ergo propter hoc," that is, "after this, therefore because of this." Doubtless many honest testimonials are based on faulty reasoning of this kind.

But let us suppose that a person with a headache took a medicine and actually, as a result of this medicine, was freed from the headache. His testimonial to this effect is printed by the medicine maker for the purpose obviously of creating in the mind of every other sufferer from headache the idea that this medicine, having cured the condition in the case of the testimonial writer, will do the same for him. Unthinking people are readily taken in by this line of reasoning. They do not stop to reflect that headaches are due to many causes and that although a medicine will relieve a headache due to one cause, it may have no effect on headaches due to various other causes.

Still a third class of honest testimonials is given by people who think they have been benefitted when, as a matter of fact, they have received no benefit at all. It is a well known fact, for example, that patients suffering from tuberculosis at times feel better, even though no improvement in the disease condition has taken place. Such an experience on the part of one who is taking a medicine may readily result in a testimonial for the medicine. We have on file numerous death certificates of writers of testimonials for a would-be tuberculosis remedy showing tuberculosis as the cause of death. You will readily appreciate, therefore, what little confidence can be placed in testimonials.

Very recently, a case under the food and drugs act came before a United

States Court of Appeals for decision, and this has an interesting bearing here. The manufacturer of a medicine contended that the statements on the labels to which the Government took exception were not therapeutic or curative claims, but were merely reports indicating that physicians had obtained favorable results from the use of the nostrum. The label said, "We have received many letters from physicians reporting," then followed a statement of what the physicians were alleged to have reported. The court issued a very interesting ruling on this point. Here is what the court said: "If, as it is alleged, the drugs are worthless, the proprietors cannot escape responsibility by hiding behind the phrase, 'Doctors say.' Couched in such language, undoubtedly, the printed matter makes a more personal appeal to the credulity of sufferers from these diseases than if the representations thus employed were made directly upon the authority alone of the proprietors and, for that reason, they are not less, but more obnoxious under the law."

A desirable precaution for label readers is to remember that the quick sometimes gives his company a high sounding name, such as, for example, The World Research and Chemical Extraction Corporation. Therefore, read the manufacturer's name with this idea in mind.

Another form of misleading labeling of worthless medicines is to use coined names suggesting that they are useful in the cure of serious diseases such as, for example, "Tuberculoids," "Lungheala," "Femaline," "Vagaseptic," "Novavita," "As-Me-Syde." All of these are actual names of products which have been proceeded against under the food and drugs act as fraudulently misbranded. There have been thousands of such coined names used.

Beware of the names, "Bear Oil," "Life Wine," "Rattlesnake Oil," "Magic Trokeys," "Life Balm," and the like. Products under these and similar names have been declared fraudulent under the Federal food and drugs act.

Minimize the importance of nostrum slogans. Some fix your mind on the possibility of your having, or of getting, a serious disease. Some are indirect promises of cures which the products cannot effect. Some just serve to fix the name of a definite product in your minds. They all urge you to buy.

My friends, many medicine fakers print their own likenesses on their labels and on their advertising circulars, often with a facsimile signature. Why do they do this? In my opinion, they do it for two reasons. They are giving expression to vulgar egoism, and they wish to impress you by their brazenness. My advice is to look these pictures over carefully. Generally, the faces of the fakers betray their characters. I had two alleged tuberculosis cures before me last week. Both were accompanied with reproductions of photographs of the proprietors. I wish you could see these pictures. One depicted the quack holding a bottle of his nostrum in each hand---and portraying fraud in his countenance and in his attitude to anyone who will study the picture. The other is a more dignified looking individual, but still, on close examination, he too appears to be a faker. Listen to what he said on the circular with his photograph: "I certify that my tuberculosis compound contains no creosote, mercury, calomel, strychnine, no narcotics or habit-forming drugs, nor anything irritating, dangerous, or harmful to the stomach or intestines. It contains only tested exhilarating and vitalizing herbs, roots, and ingredients that eliminate the bugs." Have you ever

heard such bunk? Have you ever heard such a meaningless statement? Why is it made?

Note the words used! Note the words, "exhilarating and vitalizing." Note the slang use of the word, "bugs." Do you suppose any honest scientist would ever formulate such an expression? My friends, unfortunately, there are no drugs or combinations of drugs which will of themselves cure tuberculosis. Now my advice about this photograph-display business is to study such pictures with the idea of determining for yourselves whether they represent fakers. And let me say that when they appear on medicines sold for the cure of serious diseases they are likenesses of fakers.

The next caution is to beware of products labeled with bombastic language. When you see such expressions as, "The boon of bountiful nature," "Nature's colossal creation," "Microbes run rampant unless you curb them," and other bombastic expressions, remember that bombast is another tool of the faker.

Another method of the medicine faker is to practice mental suggestion to make you believe you have some serious disease. Many people, on reading lurid descriptions of symptoms as are often found in medicine almanacs, become introspective and convinced that they have a disease which doesn't really exist at all. Such people are very prone to become habitual medicine takers. And let me say that fake medicines are a drain on the pocketbooks of a large part of our population. They keep some families in poverty.

Beware of claims that products are of God-given origin - or that they are results of dream revelations - or that they have come down from father to son from some remote but wise source - or that an Indian medicine man had something to do with their origin. Such claims are usually false, silly, and meaningless.

More subtle appeals to your credulity and patronage are those that are based on recent and popular scientific developments in medicine and nutrition. Practically every popular scientific discovery is seized upon for exploitation purposes and followed by a host of fake products labeled in a manner to capitalize on the public's conception of the discovery. Illustrating this, I may point to the fact that a vast number of products have been offered to the public on the basis of vitamin claims. Appeals are made to you to buy medicines because of their vitamin content. Some of these are worthless, many of the claims are exaggerated, and you are frequently given an erroneous idea of the public's need of vitamins. Because of such appeals, you may spend good money for so-called "vitamin" concoctions which you may not need at all. My advice here is to read labels carefully - note the real meaning of the language employed - and ascertain exactly, in so far as possible, what the limitations of the products are, because generally they have decided limitations.

My friends, I will not have time to tell you more about how to read labels on medicines today, and yet I have not completed what I wish you to know. Therefore, I will talk to you on the subject again next week. In the meantime, let me urge you to read medicine labels critically. I want you to

build up a resistance to credulity, to build up a defense against being misled by false promises of curative effects from medicines which cannot possibly do what is claimed for them. My purpose in this long series of radio talks is to teach the consumers of the Nation how to read labels in order to realize all the benefits which will accrue from intelligent label reading. I have talked on a great many food and drug products. Copies of this talk and all of my previous talks are available to all who request them. All you have to do is to write to:

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THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
IN SENATE AND HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
JANUARY 18, 1901
REPORT
OF THE
COMMISSIONER OF THE GENERAL LAND OFFICE
IN RESPONSE TO A RESOLUTION PASSED BY THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
JANUARY 18, 1901
AND BY THE SENATE
JANUARY 18, 1901
WASHINGTON
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